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# Welders program aims to seal a better life for inmates

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The Sullivan County Jail may be located at the end of a dead end road in Unity, but there are a number of people working to help prevent inmates from hitting dead ends once they return to their lives outside.

One part of that goal is a service offered in the Maintenance Department, welder training.

Eastern Bridge LLC of Claremont is helping support the technical job skill training by donating welding supplies and equipment to the fledgling program at the county facility.

**Unity** "We're always looking for experienced welders and someone with steel fabrication skills," said Cliff Thornberry, Production Manager and Supervisor at the structural metal manufacturing company.

The company's altruistic donations of safety equipment, welding sticks, scrap metal and a 'professional grade welder', could ultimately benefit everyone. As the men receive training and seek jobs upon release, Eastern Bridge will fill needed positions with qualified welders.

"It started as a basic cost cutting idea by getting them working on auto maintenance," said Sullivan County's Department of Corrections, (DOC), Superintendent Ross Cunningham. "We would like to make it a part of the regular curriculum."

John Rogers, an experienced welder employed by Easter Bridge, and currently



John Rogers, on left, supervises Aaron Gould during his welding training at the Sullivan County Jail. The vocational training is part of a growing rehabilitation program at the facility.

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incarcerated, saw what was going on inside the system and realized there was something he could do.

Already offering his expertise in the maintenance department at the jail and teaching welding skills to other inmates, Rogers approached his employer to see if they could assist the jail with more equipment.

"I thought I could start a class and teach a trade," Rogers said, so the men would have more job opportunities when they got out.

"I've been in twice now," he continued, admitting he's made mistakes that put him there, "and I've seen so many kids turn around and go right back in. I want to give them a chance.

"The biggest thing for me... I just want to help," he said. "If I can help one guy, it will be worth it."

Aaron Gould, one guy who has been an inmate for three weeks got involved when he heard everyone talking about the class.

"I wanted to learn something new," he said, and appreciates Rogers taking the time to come down and train them. The 19 year-old Gould looks forward to having a direction.

Nine out of ten male inmates return to Sullivan County Jail as repeat offenders.

"We're teaching guys, that are working 'dead-end' jobs, marketable skills," said Officer Bryant Brown. "We're bolstering their self confidence and self esteem."

Officer Brown works in the Transitional Housing Unit, (THS), of the County Jail and facilitates the welder training project as part of the process of helping inmates attain some of the things they need to make it in society.

Living and working in the THS is an earned privilege and inmates must provide work hours each month to the county complex, helping defer costs to the county.

Life skills classes, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, GED certification, and other programs are

in place and plans for more are on the way.

"It's not just drug and alcohol programs," said Rogers. "We need this [job training] too."

According to Brown, the vocational training is one piece in a multi-faceted approach.

"We see a need, we address the need as it comes up," added John Gramuglia, Director of Programming at the DOC.

Maintenance and Safety Manager at Eastern Bridge, Tony Levesque, supports the donation and the training program, and has been volunteering at the jail for about four months.

"What do inmates do when they get out?" he asked. "They go right back to their old friends and old lifestyle. I'm up here to try to help some guys get their lives together. This is just equipment, but it's something we can do."

While interviewing and teaching inmates, Levesque found that a lot of them didn't know how to find a job. Part of the program is teaching them how to go about it and how to keep it, while dealing with conflicts like getting to work on time.

Even though Levesque's job doesn't normally involve working with inmates, his role as a community member reaching out to make a difference is helping get the ball rolling.

"I'm a big believer that corrections is a community problem," said Brown. "A community involved in community problems is ultimately going to provide a vista" to solutions.

"In a short amount of time, we're seeing a positive affect," said Mark Kenney, DOC Maintenance Foreman.

Already Eastern Bridge has hired one employee trained at the facility, and a second is going through the hiring process now. The company is currently in expansion, so they could potentially hire as many as an additional 40 employees in the next year.

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